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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3940
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
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RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 6030
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 3724
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 3583
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 4272
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RHMCSUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 4211
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 1337
RUCPDOG/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC
RHEBAAA/DEPT OF ENERGY WASHDC
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L ASHGABAT 001642

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN, DRL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/21/2019

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: OFFICIALS RAID BAPTIST CHURCH

REF: A. ASHGABAT 1590

[1](#)B. ASHGABAT 1596

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Sylvia Reed Curran. Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

[1](#)1. (C) Shohrat Shirmedov, son of the pastor of the Iman Yoly (Path of Faith) Baptist church in Dashoguz, came to the Embassy to relate events that took place at his church in Dashoguz on Sunday, December 20. Shirmedov said that church members, all ethnic Turkmen, were at the place where they worship preparing for Christmas festivities, when two policemen and members from the local Council on Religious Affairs came in and asked to do a routine inspection. However, instead of coming in for an inspection, they shepherded everyone outside where many more policemen were waiting to take everyone to the hakimlik's (local governor's) offices. There, the church members were questioned for several hours. The pastor, Begjan Shirmedov, was also taken to the hakimlik's office, but held and questioned separately from the rest of the church members. The police also confiscated the group's religious materials during the raid, including bibles. Although the church members and the pastor were released after several hours, the materials were not returned.

[1](#)2. (C) Shirmedov added that while the hakimlik's office was questioning the church members, his own house was being searched. His 16-year old niece was the only one home at the time, but that did not stop the policemen from going in and seizing his religious materials. He noted that he was nervous that the police had planted something illegal, which they could, in a few months, return to "find" and charge him with possessing. Meanwhile, Shirmedov was on his way to Ashgabat. When he arrived, the police in Ashgabat asked to search his belongings. They opened his suitcase, pulled out all his books, and confiscated his personal bible. They asked him if he had any disks, which he did not.

[1](#)3. (C) Shirmedov explained that although the group had been told by local authorities several times that they should not

meet until they were registered, the Iman Yoly church had not had any problems for the last two years, until yesterday. He did not know what had changed. He said both the local police and Council on Religious Affairs leadership was the same. He speculated that perhaps the police were trying to shut his group down before Christmas. Or maybe the local authorities were just bored, he quipped. He added that his church had always been very open about their activities. When the police arrived on Sunday, the pastor invited them in to see what the members were doing to prepare for Christmas.

14. (C) COMMENT: Although Shirmedov told Poloff that the Turkmen Government had seized religious books from him before, and at one point he had been banned from traveling abroad, he did not seem to think that this raid on his church was business as usual. He said that he was worried for his family and for the other church members who might be pressured at work and at school. Especially vulnerable are those working for the Turkmen Government. It is unclear what has changed since the roundtable for unregistered religious groups on December 3 (ref A) when the Iman Yoly pastor asserted that his group was not having any trouble with the authorities. We have not heard of any of the other groups that participated experiencing pressure, but the MFA did express displeasure that the Embassy held the event (ref B).
END COMMENT.
CURRAN